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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Proper 22/B
Job 1:1; 2:1-10
Hebrews 1st 1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Between our reading from the Book of Job and the Gospel of Mark, the lectionary is not pulling any punches today.

Suffering and divorce are never easy topics to approach, and are made harder when we – you and I – don't know each other's stories yet.

I remarked to someone this week that I don't yet have a sense of the "preaching sweet-spot" here at St. James'. I don't know where the edge is between challenging folk in their faith journey and just ticking them off. I don't yet know those things that are held in common here and those things which are divisive.

But what I do know is that there are people in this community who know and have known suffering, and there are people here that have been touched by divorce.

And so today I'm going to preach from some of my deep truth in the hopes that it may resonate with you, or spark questions for you – and even if it ticks you off, I hope it help us keep the conversation going as we come to know each other.

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I have tried over the years to find something I value about the Book of Job, and have been unsuccessful.

Part of the Oath of Conformity all clergy must sign and vow to in the Episcopal Church includes the candidate declaring, “*I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation.*”

When then Deacon Carter Heyward was preparing along with ten other women to be ordained priests, Bishop Robert Dewitt addressed her concerns about her ability to uphold the Oath *to the letter of the law* with the following reflection:

“First... to affirm the Bible as the Word of God doesn’t mean that it’s the only Word of God; second, to say that it contains all things necessary to salvation doesn’t mean that everything it contains is necessary to salvation.”¹

It doesn’t mean that everything contained in scripture is necessary to salvation...

This is a nuance that has stuck with me over the years, and been a companion to my prayers. And it helps me every time I encounter Job.

The entire Book of Job revolves around one of my theological hotspots: theodicy – or how the goodness of God can be vindicated in the face of the various evils in the world to which innocent persons are subjected.²

¹ Darlene O’Dell, *The Story of the Philadelphia Eleven*, pg. 73.

Put more directly, it is the problem of evil – how can an all-powerful God also be an all-loving God in the face of evil? It is the question you’ve perhaps asked, of why bad things happen to good people.

And the answer to that question, is that it’s *not* answered by Job. This book offers no easy answers to suffering and injustice, and was indeed likely written to challenge easy answers that had been offered to the community from whence it arose.

Instead, in Job, we see a God who seems capricious, entering into a bet with one of God’s servants. (Here Satan – which can be translated as “the adversary” – serves God and is not yet the diabolical opponent of God’s righteous purpose as he later appears in Jewish apocalyptic writings and the New Testament.)

And so begins the suffering of Job in every way imaginable – which we read the beginning of today, and will revisit over the next month of Sundays.

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I don’t *understand* suffering, though I know it.

I don’t know *why* bad things happen to good people – or to anyone for that matter.

I don’t *believe* that “everything happens for a reason.”

Suffering as it is presented in Job – “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” – is, for me, neither redemptive nor necessary for salvation.

² Paul E. Capetz, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*.

However...

I do believe that God is *with* us in our suffering.

I know in my being that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God.

I understand the power of *hope*.

This is what I get from today's Gospel reading.

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The Pharisees came to Jesus and once again asked him a question they hoped would trap him. Jesus took their question and turned it back upon them, and then did something altogether different.

They asked him about divorce, he spoke to them about marriage.

They asked a legal question, he responded with the implications of the reign of God – that is the coming of the kingdom of God here on earth.

When the reign of God comes, the Love of God shown in justice, compassion, and reconciliation will be fully known.

When the reign of God comes, hardness of heart will be vanquished and the ways in which we fall short in our relationships with one another will give way to the wholeness that God desires for us.

This is the deeper theological understanding underneath the back and forth with the religious leaders – even when he speaks harshly about those who remarry to his disciples.

Jesus' admonition about those who remarry committing adultery is akin to how he spoke in our Gospel passage from last week:

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.³

There is a consistency in hyperbole here – in Jesus' ability to speak so outrageously as to make people – *make us* – stop and pay attention. To not let ourselves be inured to the message. To think, and question, and perhaps begin to engage in **wholeness-making**.

Because that is what God longs for – our wholeness.

For some suffering has included the pain of divorce. And for some wholeness has been found in remarrying. I believe God is present in all of it.

³ Mark 9:43-48, NRSV.

In next week's Gospel we get that beautiful phrase, "*For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.*"

This is how I know that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Because God's love is abiding – in a way our love cannot always be. And with God's love comes God's mercy – the source of comfort and peace in our lives when we trust that God is always with us: in our suffering and our joy, in our questions and praise.

This is where I find hope. Amidst suffering and brokenness, shame and vulnerability – when we encounter the questions that seem to have no answers, or ones that seem to do more harm than help –

God is with us.

God loves us.

God offers wholeness.

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Perhaps when everything else in the Book of Job is stripped away, that is what we are left with. And if that's the case, then maybe I have finally found value there after all. As the saying goes, hope springs eternal.

~ AMEN ~